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P-Liebes, B. H.

P-Durbin, Tillman

Edwards, Forrest

Elegant, Robert

Hughes, John

Karnow, Stanley

Kumpa, Peter

Lin, Sidney

Nelan, Bruce

Smith, Charles

Stewart, Jan

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Kumpa also under ...

dangers of China Watching.

Like interpreting the Bible

"Mao has issued so many directives that you can choose from them to prove almost any point. Interpreting what goes on in China is like interpreting the Bible. And you know what trouble that has led to."

Kumpa, a China Watcher since March 1966, also has the distinction of being a Kremlinologist, having served for several years as the Sun's correspondent in Moscow. Assisting Kumpa is a top Chinese newsman, Eddie Wu, who managed to leave China in 1965.

"On occasion I have gotten rather different interpretations of the same situation in China from different people in the (U. S.) consulate," said one correspondent, speaking for background only. "But no one at the consulate ever tried to give me an interpretation tailored to fit U. S. policy."

Information from China can be classified into two categories: (1) "safe" news sponsored and distributed by Peking and (2) news available by other means. "Safe" sources are the New China News Agency, Peking Radio, two Peking published daily newspapers and selected periodicals.

News available "by other means" includes broadcasts from the provincial radio stations—the broadcasts are intended chiefly for internal consumption but are easily monitored; information from refugees, travelers and other less overt sources, including letters, smuggled newspapers, and "leaks" from intelligence sources.

Chief "safe" source for news is the official New China News Agency (Hsinhua). It puts out a daily report in English but for obvious reasons it won't service American organizations. Americans, however, tap into Xinhua reports through a Hong

# The China Watchers

## Search for Red policy clues tailored to patience, tedium

By B. H. Liebes

For American newsmen the task of reporting about Communist China from the watching post of Hong Kong must be one of the most frustrating assignments in the world.

The Peking government won't let them into the country; therefore they can't get first-hand information or do the "sight, sound, and smell" reporting that is essential to the craft.

What news and publications China officially permits through the Bamboo Curtain are carefully screened, frequently delayed, and ideologically slanted.

The official news output, though voluminous, is dully repetitious and coded in the peculiar semantical jargon of the Chinese Communists. To interpret the signals correctly, a correspondent must know how to crack the semantical code. One correspondent likened China Watching to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle—a made-in-China jigsaw puzzle—with some of the key pieces deliberately held back.

Sometimes weeks or months go by before the facts emerge to confirm the web of circumstantial evidence.

### As in days of Stalin

R. H. Shackford, onetime China Watcher for the Scripps Howard Newspaper Alliance, said the closest parallel was covering Russia during the days of Stalin when the only material available for foreign newsmen was that which appeared in *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, or other Soviet publications.

But Shackford points out there always were a few American newsmen in Moscow even in the darkest days of the Stalin era. But there are no American reporters in Peking today.

When American correspondents in Hong Kong discuss China Watching they usually resort to analogies:

"It's like panning for gold; every statement has to be sifted for a possible nugget"; "an exercise in cryptography; you have to decipher 'like peering into a fogged-up window.'"

Although there are about 20 newsmen in Hong Kong working for American news organizations, only a handful can be considered "China Watchers."

The definition of what constitutes a China Watcher, as distinguished from a "China Reporter," emerged in conversations with the newsmen themselves and with officials at the American Consulate General, itself the home for the greatest concentration of China Watchers.

The criteria for defining China Watchers were subjective, and there was not an unanimity as to names. Judgments were made on the basis of personal appraisals by correspondents of their colleagues and assessments by other knowledgeable sources of a reporter's expertise in analyzing and interpreting events.

### Goes with territory

Several of the correspondents named as China Watchers disclaimed the expertise that the title proclaimed. Several pointed out that reporting about China was only part of their assignment; they noted that their news territory also covered other vast areas such as the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia and mainland Southeast Asia with the exception of Vietnam. Their home offices almost invariably had separate bureaus for Vietnam.

By what may be more than a coincidence the correspondents named all worked for media respected for their international news coverage. Also, most of the reporters had the freedom to write interpretively, more so than most reporters enjoy.

Altogether ten reporters were acknowledged as China Watchers. Six worked for the daily newspapers, two for the wire services, two for news magazines. In alphabetical order the "club" members were Tillman Durbin of the *New York Times*, Forrest Edwards of the Associated Press, Robert Elegant of the *Los Angeles Times*, John Hughes of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Stanley Karnow of the *Washington Post*, Peter Kumpa of the *Baltimore Sun*, Sidney Lin of *Newswatch*, Bruce Nelan of the *Washington Post*, and Jan Stewart of the *Washington Post*.

Nelan of *Time*, Charles of *United Press International* and Ian Stewart of the *York Times*.

"China Watchers are stylists, not experts," said Stanley Karnow of the *Washington Post*. "They specialize in reporting China, but they are not experts on China. Some may have knowledge about China that's all." Karnow spoke with a background of 10 years in Hong Kong, the last five as correspondent for the *Washington Post*. Previously he reported on China for *Time* magazine and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Forrest Edwards, the AP's bureau chief in Hong Kong since 1965, put it more bluntly: "Anyone who says he knows what is going on in China is one of three things: either he's a liar, a fool, or he has been in Hong Kong for three days." This is Edwards' second turn of China Watching; he also reported from Hong Kong from 1957-1961.

### Perceptive observations

Despite what they said about the limitations under which they work, the correspondents individually were proud of reporting perceptively about the goings on inside the black box marked "Made in China," without being able to make on-the-scene observations, a sine qua non of the reporting craft.

China Watchers often disagreed on their interpretations of Chinese events but not on what they called the tedium of their work.

"What you need is a good memory, an excellent filing system, and a high tolerance for boredom," said Tillman Durbin of the *New York Times*. Durbin has the longest acquaintance with Chinese affairs of all the China Watchers. He has reported from Asia for 25 years and has lived in China. During World War II he was based in Chungking and is one of the few American correspondents to have interviewed Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai.

"Reporting about China demands constant reading," said Kumpa of the *Baltimore Sun*. "You have to wade through millions of words."